

## **Cities and Regional Development in England – a festival of scales and regions?**

**Olivier Sykes and Alex Nurse**

Department of Geography and Planning

University of Liverpool

### **1.0 Introduction**

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards urbanisation strongly marked the development of Great Britain with a majority of the population already being concentrated into urban areas before the end of the century. In-keeping with trends in many countries structures of local government were reformed to progressively address the representative, economic, social and physical needs of expanding urban areas (Briggs, 1963, Hunt, 2005). Major reform in the 1970s introduced a scale of Metropolitan Counties in the largest English conurbations to address key strategic planning and development issues. However, these were abolished in the 1980s under the regime of Margaret Thatcher. In the 1990s and early 2000s regional development and spatial planning structures emerged at the scale of ‘standard regions’ larger than the metropolitan scale. Yet from the mid-2000s onwards the city-regional scale again rose to prominence in the work of researchers and through initiatives driven by local government cooperation in certain large metropolitan areas – notably Manchester. Since 2010 new structures called Combined Authorities have emerged to oversee development at city-regional scale in a number of large conurbations. City regions have also been given prominence by state initiatives designed to address regional development disparities such as the so-called *Northern Powerhouse*. This presentation will consider where the current wave of metropolitanisation initiatives fits into the history and trajectory of city and regional development in England.

## **2.0 A Brief history of early 20<sup>th</sup> century reflection on city regions**

Although city regions have risen to prominence as a key scale of reflection and public action over recent decades (Jones et al., 2015), analytical and normative attention to this scale is not new in the UK. As Essex and Brayshay (2005, 240) note:

*“Informed by the writings of radical thinkers such as Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford & Charles Fawcett, debates in the 1920s and 1930s about the development of planning law focussed on the need to devise a spatial framework for treating cities, neighbouring small towns and the surrounding countryside, not as separate entities, but as a unity”*

The 1920s and 1930s thus saw a focus on regional plans which were seen as a way of bringing together the needs of cities and their surrounding rural areas and settlements in a more integrated manner. The most celebrated planner of the time, Patrick Abercrombie adopted and used the ‘regional approach’ in plans for London, Hull, Bath, Edinburgh, Clyde Valley, West Midlands and North Staffordshire. Reflecting this activity, David Massey (1989) described the inter-war years as the ‘experimental era’ of regional planning. Before and during World War 2 there was much reflection on the regional, industrial and planning issues facing the UK. The Barlow Report considered the distribution of the industrial population; the Uthwatt Report compensation and betterment and the Scott Committee rural land use, with Abercrombie’s two celebrated plans for London being prepared at this time.

## **3.0 Building the capacity to act at a supra-local scale, 1940 - 1986**

Following World War Two, planning assumed an important role in the reconstruction of the nation with the foundation of the modern planning system in 1947 and a state-led New Towns programme and regional policy (Alexander, 2009). Yet when it came to the planning of major metropolitan areas, according to (Roberts et al., 1999):

*“...most of the period from 1945 to 1974 was distinguished by the perpetuation of a fragmented system of local government and planning” and:*

*“This fragmented system of local government worked against the capacity to plan metropolitan regions as a whole, and also frequently divided responsibility for homogenous metropolitan areas between urban and shire authorities”*

A fragmented system of local government and planning persisted until further reflection on the structure of local government and planning during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1965 the Greater London Council (GLC) was established and later in the 1960s the Redcliffe-Maud and Wheatley reports respectively presented proposals for the reform of local government in England and Scotland. These led to the creation of Metropolitan County Councils in England and Regional Authorities in Scotland (Pugh, 2014). In England six Metropolitan Counties were created which were in existence from 1974 to 1986 (Table 1):

**Table 1 – Metropolitan Counties in England, 1974 – 1986**

Name of Metropolitan County	Constituent Local Authorities (municipalities)
Greater Manchester	City of Manchester, City of Salford, Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan
Merseyside	City of Liverpool, Knowsley, St. Helens, Sefton, Wirral
South Yorkshire	City of Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham
Tyne and Wear	City of Newcastle, City of Sunderland, Gateshead, South Tyneside, North Tyneside
West Midlands	City of Birmingham, City of Coventry, City of Wolverhampton, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall
West Yorkshire	City of Leeds, City of Bradford, City of Wakefield, Calderdale, Kirklees

Many of the counties created were smaller in area than those proposed by the Redcliffe-Maud report and in the conurbations the “metropolitan principle” was retained but the boundaries cut back “thus ignoring the city regional principle” (Hall (2007) p21). However,

three additional Metropolitan Counties were included in addition to those originally proposed for the conurbations of Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham - West Yorkshire; South Yorkshire; and Tyne and Wear; and the system provided a strategic capacity to address issues including: land use planning, transportation, economic development, environmental enhancement & waste management. In the new system structure (strategic) planning functions were performed by Metropolitan County Councils and local planning functions by their constituent metropolitan districts (see Table 1 above). However, this division of planning function between Metropolitan counties and districts led to disagreements about goals and implementation. Structure plans were also criticised for attempting to be too ambitious in addressing a wide range of economic and social issues, taking too long to prepare, and being too complex and providing too much detail.

The historical context also played an important role in the emerging critique of Metropolitan County Councils. The late 1970s marked the beginnings of the rise of the political New Right and influence of neoliberal thought in the UK. In this setting ideological issues helped fuel the critique of Metropolitan County Councils and ultimately impacted on the structures for metropolitan (city regional) government. After 1979 the Thatcherite 'project' sought to redefine relations between state and society and this had implications for how metropolitan governance was conducted (Tewdwr-Jones and McNeil, 2000). There was a new emphasis on competitive bidding for funding, and engagement with interests and actors outside local government and partnership with the private sector. The polarisation of politics in the 1980s created a difficult context for the Labour Party controlled Metropolitan Counties and the GLC, who developed a quite antagonistic relationship with the central government. The more interventionist approach of the Greater London Council in particular, conflicted with the new Government's ideology and the Conservative Party manifesto for the 1983 election promised to abolish Metropolitan County Councils. The Conservatives won the election, swept to power on a tide of jingoism in the wake of the Falklands War, and shortly afterwards published a White Paper '*Streamlining the Cities*' (1983) which argued that Metropolitan County Councils had struggled to assert themselves and had consistently exceeded their expenditure targets.

With the Conservatives back firmly in power, 1985/86 saw the abolition of the Metropolitan County Councils. The fact that they had all been Labour-controlled did not escape the attention of many commentators and it does seem that, in the 1980s, ideological positions influenced stances towards metropolitan government structures within a wider context of "roll-back neoliberalism" (Peck and Tickell, 2002) sceptical of the role of public authorities in addressing societal issues. In essence: a). the Metropolitan Councils were Labour Party

controlled and the Greater London Council was in open conflict with the central government on a number of issues, and, b). the metropolitan scale was a relative ‘newcomer’ in the institutional landscape of sub-state government, and at a historical juncture where a ‘less is more’ attitude towards public action prevailed they were an easy target for abolition.

The abolition of Metropolitan Councils had certain effects on planning in metropolitan areas. More emphasis was placed on local level and project based planning rather than on the strategic metropolitan scale and some have argued that this led to a loss of strategic overview on the needs of such areas. After the Metropolitan Councils a new system of *Unitary Development Plans* (UDP) was introduced containing both general/strategic (Part I) and more specific policies (Part 2). The wider strategic dimension was to be provided by a new informal system of collaboratively developed Strategic Planning Guidance (SPG). It is also worth noting that joint boards were retained to coordinate functions surrounding Police, fire, public transport and, in some areas, waste management.

However, despite this, in the decade and a half which followed the abolition of Metropolitan County Councils, it has been argued that the instability of arrangements for city regional / metropolitan planning led to a “*fragmentation of expertise and the constant need for authorities to adjust to new organisational geographies*” (Roberts et al., 1999). The UDP system did have the advantage of having plan preparation & implementation residing in the same authority as opposed to these functions being more split between a local and a strategic planning level. However, it suffered from a reduction in the level of strategic coherence and implementation capacity at the metropolitan level; what some perceived as a ‘strategic policy vacuum’ (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (2007) p31).

Yet, despite this, in some places more bottom-up forms of cooperation kept the metropolitan scale ‘alive’ and managed to compensate for some of the gaps in strategic thinking which the institutional structure tended to encourage. It is interesting to note that city regions like Greater Manchester, where what one might term this kind of ‘city regional institutional ecology’ became strongly rooted through innovative associations like the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA), also emerged as the most well-placed to respond to the revived city regional agenda of the 2000s and 2010s (see section xxx below).

#### **4.0 The 1990s to the 2000s – *administrative regionalization but failed regionalism***

The 1980s was thus not a very receptive period in England for notions of regional planning and governance. Regional policy was dismissed as an outdated form of state-led economic planning with Socialist overtones, whilst regulatory planning – especially if performed at the strategic scale and requiring some form of related institutional/government structure for its delivery, was perceived as an expense and potential hindrance to entrepreneurial development activity.

However, the following period in the 1990s and 2000s was marked by growing attention to the regional scale. In fact, Hall (2007) notes that, in the 1990s, a “miraculous reincarnation” (p22) of strategic planning at regional level was discernible with the creation of Regional Planning Guidance and Regional Government Offices for the nine English regions. Between 1994 and 2010/11 these provided for different ministries to have deconcentrated sub-national offices and had a role in policy and programme administration; regional representation (Whitehall’s “eyes and ears”); and, intra-regional coordination.

After 1997 and the election of the first Blair government there was a return of a form of regional economic planning with the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) tasked with developing Regional Economic Strategies (RES). This was accompanied by devolution to Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and London. The Greater London Authority recreated a metropolitan scale of government for London for the first time since the 1980s with the power to make and adopt a metropolitan-scale London Plan. Conceptions of planning were also evolving with the idea of spatial planning having an influence on government and some scholars of planning. This was seen as an approach to planning which went beyond land use planning to consider the wider effects and interactions of public and private investments and actions on the making and functioning of places. In 2004 Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) were introduced in the English regions providing the strategic context for plans at lower levels. Before 2004 ‘Regional Planning Guidance’ (RPG) was advisory only, i.e. was not part of the ‘statutory development plan’. The 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act changed its name to RSS, abolished County Structure plans and made RSSs part of the development plan. At local level Local Development Frameworks (LDF) had to accord with the relevant RSS, and reflect its policy, in terms of housing, renewable energy, etc. Sub-regional plans could be prepared as part of RSS including for city regional areas – for example, in the North West region plans were prepared for the Liverpool and Manchester city regions.

The momentum and sense of legitimacy for planning at a regional scale was, however, undermined by the abandonment of plans to create elected Regional Assemblies for the English regions following a ‘no’ vote in a referendum on the subject in the North East of England in 2004 (Shaw and Robinson, 2007). This reinforced a sense that English regionalism was still in the words of Harvie (1991) the “dog that never barked” and that other scales (e.g. the city regional; local; neighbourhood) might secure more allegiance and citizen ‘buy-in’. The regional ‘experiment’ in England in 1990s and 2000s was principally a process of administrative regionalisation not a product of an active and widely-supported regionalism. It enjoyed only weak national level political, and intra-regional citizen, support. This made planning at the regional planning scale an easy target for the Conservatives to attack whilst in opposition, then abolish once in power after 2010.

## **5.0 The 2000s and the re-emergence of city regions**

Another important context in the 1990s and 2000s was the pursuit of a so-called ‘Urban Renaissance’ under New Labour governments (1997-2008/10). Taking its moniker from a report produced by an ‘Urban Task Force’ led by the architect Richard Rogers (Rogers, 1999), this agenda was allied with investment in regenerating the big cities (especially the centres), ‘town centre first’ policies for retail development, and targets to increase the amount of new housing built on ‘brownfield’ land to ensure reuse of previously developed land and limit sprawl. This has been seen as a generally as a success which has led to a ‘return of’ and ‘return to’ the city (Rae, 2013). In a culture which has often been characterised as having anti-urban traits (Taylor, 1998), there has been a slow shift of perceptions about cities, from their being viewed as a source and locus of problems, to a recognition of their economic, social, cultural importance

It is in this context that a renewed city-regional agenda took hold in the mid-2000s around the same time interest in establishing government structures for wider regions began to wane. In the new orthodoxy, city-regions were conceived as drivers of change in a more knowledge-based economy, in which the roles of innovation and creativity are crucial. There was also renewed attention to the boundaries of ‘functional’ urban areas (e.g. Travel to Work Areas). The regional scale was critiqued as having been too vast to make functional sense. City-regions in contrast might be constituted of groupings of Local Authorities representing a coherent area larger than the ‘local’ to generate critical mass, but less than a region.

A series of reports proposed a new governance structure of elected mayors in the leading city regions with such ideas receiving support from existing local authorities like Manchester and Birmingham. New economic geographies led to a search for new 'spatial fixes' and a variety of initiatives and reports from Government, researchers and lobby groups converged to place city regions on the agenda. This could be seen as a 'return' of awareness of and attention to the metropolitan supra-local scale which had been brushed aside in the 1980s with the abolition of Metropolitan County Councils. However, though a focus on the city region was returning, the rationale(s) being advanced for acting at this level were expressed in terms which reflected the evolution of metropolitan and regional spaces and wider political-economic contexts in the intervening two decades. In the 2000s a heavy emphasis was placed on pursuing economic development and spatial planning at this scale. Government commissioned research in the 2000s emphasized the role of 'Core Cities' as drivers of regional economies, but it also suggested that England's core cities were not 'punching their weight' in comparison with the leading regional cities in other European countries (Parkinson et al., 2004).

In short an *economic* and *political* case was being made for city regions in which cities were again seen as motors of the national and regional economies. In England and the wider UK this stated that there was a need to depend on more than 'the London effect' if national economic growth was to be sustainable. The Commission also noted the vacuum of governance arrangements existed at the regional and City regional levels arguing that attention to the City regional scale might revitalise the devolution debate and offer a way forward after the failure of the Government's plans for Elected Regional Assemblies in the English regions.

The example of Greater London with the creation of a Greater London Assembly (GLA) and elected Mayor following a referendum in 1998 also served as an inspiration. The GLA, overseen by a mayor and assembly, acquired responsibility for transport; strategic spatial planning (with the creation of a London Plan); economic development; environment; Policing; fire and emergency planning; and, Culture/sport; health; energy. The London Boroughs retained most functions including local planning.

In this context there was a renewed emphasis on city regions in the North of England and their role in bridging the regional 'productivity gap' with of the north with the rest of the UK (notably the English average) led to the adoption of the Northern Way Growth Strategy (NWGS). This was developed by the three northern Regional Development Agencies (RDA) with the aim of bridging the £29 billion output gap between the north of England and the rest of the UK. The fact the initiative had around £100 million to achieve this meant its impact as

measured against this objective would always be limited<sup>1</sup>. But it did seek to promote partnership working in the North and capitalise on the northern regions' indigenous growth potential principally across eight city regions which were seen as the key to making the economy of the North grow faster (Table 2).

Table 2 – The Eight City Regions of the Northern Way Growth Strategy (2004)

Region	City Regions
North East England	Tees Valley Tyne and Wear
North West England	Central Lancashire Liverpool City Region Manchester City Region
Yorkshire and the Humber	Hull and Humber Ports Leeds City Region Sheffield City Region

In the late-2000s so-called Multi Area Agreements (MAAs) were introduced to foster cross-boundary working (signed in September 2009) (Nurse, 2012). The process of establishing the sub-regional scale as the key site for the delivery of economic development measures thus gained momentum even before the end of the New Labour era – with a harbinger of things to come being the passing in 2009 of legislation permitting the creation of a new inter-municipal entities called 'Combined Authorities'. The process of rescaling accelerated further, however, following the 2010 general election as the new Coalition government abolished the regional level RDAs and encouraged sub-regional areas to coalesce into so called Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), with many of these emerging around city-regional geographies. It is to these developments which the paper now turns.

## 6.0 From Regions to City Regions: the 2010s

The 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government set in motion a number of fundamental changes to the way in which sub-national development would be scaled and administered. The Coalition Agreement between the parties focused on: rebalancing the economy; reducing the deficit; and localism - the irony being that at the same time severe public spending cuts had a major impact upon the ability of local authorities to provide services. The new government had a very low opinion of regional planning and moved quickly to dismantle

---

<sup>1</sup> The final reported cost of the 2012 London Olympics was reported as £8.77 billion in contrast. See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/olympics/20041426>

the structures of regional economic and spatial planning (Nurse, 2015a). These were replaced with *Local Enterprise Partnerships* (LEPs), centred on functional economic areas and conceived with the notion that economic growth could be better delivered at this smaller scale and led by business working in partnership with the public sector (DCLG, 2010a, DCLG, 2010b, Pugalis, 2011). By the end of 2010, 39 LEPs had replaced the 8 English RDAs, with many premised on a city and its surroundings (i.e. city regions). To bid for ‘Growth Deals’, LEPs were required to draw up multi-year strategic economic plans, setting out the priorities for long-term growth in their areas.

Meanwhile the Core Cities Group<sup>2</sup> have continued to be vocal in arguing for the fullest possible devolution of public spending and tax raising powers to the UK’s largest cities and city regions. The Group argues for a rebalancing of the relationship between central government and cities, as the only real solution for addressing the interconnected challenges of local economic growth, public service reform and better governance.

The city and city regional agenda was swiftly developed in 2011 with the announcement of a series of ‘city deals’ (DCLG, 2011), initially negotiated with the English Core Cities, and primarily premised on an increase in economic planning powers in return for referenda on changing their mode of governance towards having a directly elected mayor. Although the results of the referenda largely rejected the idea of creating elected mayors in 2012 (Sandford, 2015), it became clear that there was a democratic shortfall in the city-region agenda which needed to be addressed. Against this background, more of the new so-called Combined Authorities were created in 2014 and 2016 joining the original ‘CA’ created for Greater Manchester in 2011. These acquired further devolved powers over economic and transport planning, and incorporated the elected leaders of each district within a LEP as a means to restore electoral accountability to economic decision making (Nurse, 2015a).

Again the experience of London and the perceived benefits of devolution to other UK nations and regions has been a driver of these developments. London is perceived to have benefited from having a devolved strategic authority comprising an elected executive Mayor and scrutinising Assembly. The competences of the mayor surrounding the production of the London Plan (most recently revised in 2015); the presence of other strategies including for Housing and Transport; and, a generously-funded transport authority, Transport for London, are all seen as having helped reinforce London’s natural advantages as the UK capital. This

---

<sup>2</sup> This brings together the English cities of – Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield and Glasgow and Cardiff - <http://www.corecities.com/>

advantage can be quantified in the major investments the London area has secured – e.g. around transport (Crossrail) and the 2012 Olympic Games.

Based on its diverse range of diverse factors of production, its hyper-agglomeration tendencies, and capital city ‘dividend’ in terms of major investments and projects; London thus continues to represent the UK’s prime economic driver with regards to economic growth (McCann, 2016), and has attracted the majority of infrastructure investment. As such, the ‘archipelago economy’ identified by Dorling and Thomas (2004) which had an economically-dominant and prosperous London at its core and was surrounded by ‘islands of deprivation’ showed little signs of changing.

It was against this background that, in June 2014, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced plans for what he termed the ‘Northern Powerhouse’: a plan to create an economic bloc which could rival the growth of London (Map 1). The proposal was underpinned by notions of urban agglomeration and aimed to rebalance the UK economy away from London and the South East. In Osborne’s words:

*“We need a Northern Powerhouse too. Not one city but a collection of Northern cities - sufficiently close to each other that combined they can take on the world... You need a big place, with lots of people. Like London.”*

George Osborne (2014)

The focus on Northern England was a reflection of the reality that, outside of the London Mega-City Region, there was only place in the UK where comparable economies of scale might be achieved: in the heavily urbanised east-west belt running from Liverpool, across Manchester, and over the Pennines to Leeds and Sheffield. This is demonstrated not only by their scale and economic performance, but also their assets which include:

- Manchester International Airport.
- Top research universities high in international rankings.
- Affordable and decent housing, especially for the young professional families being priced out of London’s housing market (or forced to accept crippling commuting and mortgage costs).

Although the case for northern England was, arguably, the most compelling, the move also reflected an act of realpolitik in the aftermath of the 2014 Referendum on Scottish

Independence in which the northern cities began to question their own relationship with London (Shaw et al., 2014) and in which the populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) began to make some inroads into traditional northern power bases.

The Northern Powerhouse was to be realised through the negotiation of a series of ‘devolution deals’: a suite of agreements negotiated between the leaders of each city region and central government. The basic deal would be £900m spread over 30 years to spend on local infrastructure projects, control over skills agendas, and the assumption of control over policing and fire services. Beyond this, cities could negotiate extra powers, e.g. Manchester secured a further £300m for housing, and assumed control over health spending. In return each city region would be expected to install a ‘metro-mayor’ – a directly elected leader, with elections scheduled for May 2017.

Beyond this, the wider north would also receive significant investment in infrastructure as a means to drastically expand travel-to-work areas. This would take the form of rail electrification, with ‘HS3’ a new high-speed east-west rail link – the third expansion of the UKs high-speed rail network after HS1 (Channel – Tunnel to London) and the currently planned HS2 (London to the north of the UK).

As such, this ‘Northern Powerhouse’ would represent arguably the biggest shift in the way some of the largest UK cities were governed since 1986 and the abolition of the Metropolitan County Councils which, ironically, bore a striking geographical resemblance to many of the new Combined Authority areas. Yet, there remained questions not only in terms of the spatial clarity of the proposals (Nurse, 2015b), but also the ways in which this Northern Powerhouse represented an extension of a localism agenda, or a ‘centralisation on steroids’ (Hambleton, 2015) whereby local areas would act as the fall for implementation of central cuts.

In the aftermath of the UK’s referendum on membership of the European Union in 2016 this agenda was cast into doubt by the resignation of David Cameron, and the subsequent political marginalisation of George Osborne by the new administration of Theresa May who called for a broader regional and industrial policy (Mance and Bounds, 2016). Furthermore, given the large role that the EU has played in the past 40 years in regional policy in the UK, the impacts of leaving the EU on regional and city development are as yet uncertain. To get a sense of perspective on the potential significance of such a change, consider that the 2000-2006 EU Objective One programme invested £829 million into an area like Merseyside (the Liverpool City Region) which, with ‘match funding’ gave a total investment of over £1 billion over 6-7 years. Now compare this with the £900 million promised *over thirty years* under the

present Liverpool City Region devolution deal to get a sense of the monumental shift in public investment opportunities which may result from Brexit.

Yet despite the uncertainty unleashed by the EU referendum, subsequent comments from ministers have given some assurances that the Northern Powerhouse agenda will proceed, albeit with devolution deals now available to other cities (e.g. Swansea signed a deal in autumn 2016). In February 2017 the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund (NPIF), was launched with the aim of “boosting the North of England’s economy and helping the region’s businesses realise their growth potential”. Interestingly of the £400m being made available, £184 million was provided by the European Investment Bank - a fact few Britons are likely to see reported in their media (European Investment Bank, 2017)!

On balance, it seems that though there is some uncertainty surrounding the Northern Powerhouse initiative, it does seem to have captured the political imagination in a way in which few schemes (e.g. the Northern Way of the 2000s) had before and animated a wide variety of actors. Thus, there has been some optimism that the initiative may prove more resilient in the face of changing political contexts than some of its predecessors at least as a kind of ‘brand’ for justifying and badging investment into the north (Nurse, 2017).

What is different in comparison to other initiatives launched in England since the 1980s is that there is also a parallel process of reforming territorial governance with the devolution agenda for England. The growing number of Combined Authorities and signing of devolution deals can be seen to serve the wider Northern Powerhouse initiative, but also has a dynamic and crucially a legislative basis of its own. The new “Metro Mayors” will have powers over transport, housing, strategic planning and policing and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) has new powers including some control over business growth as well as health and social care budgets. With elections for directly elected executive mayors in a number of Combined Authority areas due to be held in 2017, it will be interesting to see, however, what level of political attachment citizens demonstrate to this new strategic scale. Voter turnouts for local elections in England are generally rather low compared to in other parts of Europe (Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006) standing at 33.8% in the May 2016 local elections (Rallings and Thrasher, 2016), and the rejection of previous initiatives such as the attempt to create regional assemblies in the 2000s and the low turnouts for existing city regional positions<sup>3</sup> may give city regional devolution enthusiasts cause for thought.

---

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2016 in major city regions like the West Midlands, Merseyside and West Yorkshire attracted a turnout of only around 30%; though this was an increase on 2012 levels. See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2016/police>

There are also issues about how city regional agendas will be handled in practice especially where there may be trade-offs to be made between different areas within a city region e.g. between central cities and peripheral cities, towns, peri-urban and rural areas. Already in Greater Manchester the city-regional mayor campaign for 2017 has become politicised around the issue of the emerging Greater Manchester Spatial Framework for the city region (Fitzgerald, 2017). As noted in earlier sections Greater Manchester is generally seen as most successful example of sustaining inter-municipal city regional working across the ‘lean years’ for metropolitan scale government. It would surely be an irony if the capacity for collective action at this scale were actually compromised, rather than strengthened by the greater formalisation and politicisation of decision-making at this scale. It is interesting however, that in both the Liverpool City Region and Greater Manchester, for example, the mayoral race has attracted MPs to stand. This switching between national level and regional/local political roles is less common in England than in France. Ambitious politicians may start life in local politics, but have rarely chosen to return to this level after having held high office at national level. The fact that some politicians will now contemplate this in return for the ‘prize’ of being a city regional mayor, shows in itself that the devolution agenda is creating at least some new political dynamics in the traditionally highly-centralised English context

## **8.0 Conclusions**

The story told above is of successive cycles of rescaling in sub-state government in the UK and particularly in England. As we have seen, the notion of planning for ‘larger than local’ territories has long existed and been considered by thinkers and actors engaged in regional and city development since the early 20<sup>th</sup>. Century. Local government reform has tried to provide institutions at the ‘right scale’ and with the right powers to address the issues of regions, but has often stalled due to lack of finance, or been stymied or reversed by subsequent legislative changes and policies. In England, new scales of reflection and action have been created in one decade only to be swept away in the next. The case of the Metropolitan Councils which existed briefly from the 1970s into the 1980s is a clear example. This episode also demonstrates the mutable quality of institutions and scales of government in a polity without a constitutionally established structure of governance levels. A scale of government/governance can be brought into being and abolished quickly through an Act of Parliament, or executive action, depending on the agenda – including the political and ideological agenda, of the government of the day. The later experiment in regionalisation in the 1990s and 2000s, which sought to establish

mechanisms of spatial and economic planning at a regional scale in England and, tentatively a form of elected regional government, for example, was also rapidly terminated by an incoming government in 2010. It might be added that this attempt at regionalisation was also undermined by the fact that it did not seem to draw-upon a desire for regionalism amongst citizens. In the only region where a referendum on creating an elected regional government was held - North East England, the idea was heavily defeated.

However, if one broadens the gaze beyond England, it should be noted that there have been very significant and enduring changes in the past 20 years with devolution to Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and London. In the case of the latter three territories this has been a 'game changer' with Scotland reemerging as a separate nation rediscovering, articulating and perhaps capable of realising its distinctive destiny; Northern Ireland largely moving on from armed conflict within a devolved and European context; and, London making full use of its rediscovered metropolitan government to cement its role as a preeminent world city and the economic powerhouse of the UK whilst capturing vast shares of public investment.

As noted above, in the rest of England experimentation with relevant scales of sub-state governance has also occurred. Notably in relation to large 'standard' regions in England (1990s and 2000s) and city-regions (2000s and 2010s), with the latter argued to better reflect 'functional' geographies (e.g. Travel to work areas; transport; housing and labour markets) than more expansive regional territories. Despite such initiatives often being hobbled by an overbearing centralism, powerful bottom-up dynamics have also been at play at different times and in different places. The 1990s saw varied efforts by Local Authorities (in their strategic planning role), business interests and others to work together to create governance capacity in some regions (e.g. the North East), and Manchester's local authorities established a city-regional cooperation model which served the city region well, made it an example to follow for others, and ensured it was at the front of the queue for new institutional arrangements in the 2010s.

Today inter-municipal cooperation is being facilitated and enshrined in the creation in a number of areas, initially based on city regions, of new Combined Authorities. These may be led by elected Mayors, and are able to negotiate devolution 'deals' with central government. Presently in the north of England such institutional innovation is taking place against the backdrop of the Northern Powerhouse initiative, but as noted above, whilst the devolution agenda may dovetail well with this at present, is also distinctive in having its own legislative basis and political rationale. Drivers of devolution to English city regions thus include the economic objective of addressing regional imbalances in England (the 'North-South' divide and its variants), but are

also political, and were energised in the aftermath of the Scottish Independence Referendum (2014) and perhaps indeed the EU referendum (2016).

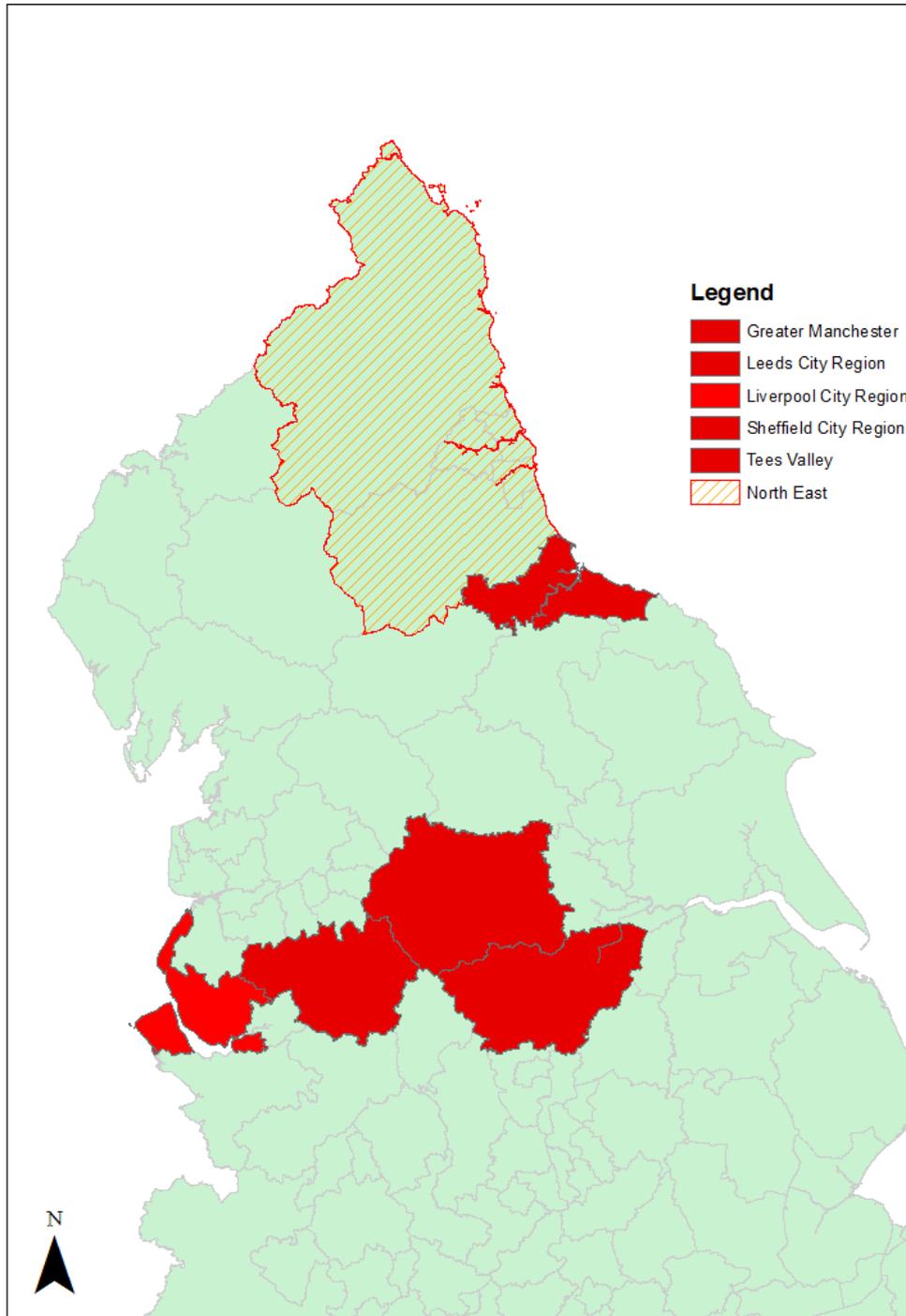
Big questions remain, however, about how far such structures will be able to reconcile the interests of complex and diverse territories, for example, ‘core city’ and ‘city regional’ agendas; with approaches to spatial planning (e.g. potential Greenbelt revisions), providing one possible area of tension. There is also the important question – thrown into sharp relief by the current angry anti-institutional political context, of how far such new institutions will secure ‘buy-in’ from citizens. One can well imagine the accusations of ‘diktats’ from above imposed by remote and undemocratic institutions, if (when!), CAs take unpopular decisions from a perspective of a strategic/collective wider territorial interest (e.g. releasing Greenbelt land for housing, or infrastructure development). The structures of local government described today reflect an ongoing process of searching for the next ‘spatial fix’ to resolve the issues facing society. Though institutional configurations may stabilise for a period (often a shorter period in England than in other places; including in the UK), they are always open to contestation and redefinition and ultimately rescaling. Thus whilst sub-state devolution is still on the agenda in England, as we write a new *national* industrial strategy is being consulted on (HM Government, 2017) leading some to ask ‘what will cities get’ from this (Jones, 2017) and how ‘place-based’ government policy may turn out to be in a more ‘nationalistic’ polity in the wake of the EU referendum.

## References

- Alexander, A (2009) *Britain's New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities*. Taylor and Francis
- Briggs, A (1963) *Victorian Cities*,. London: Odhams Press Limited
- DCLG (2010a) Functional Economic Market Areas. London
- DCLG (2010b) Letter to Local Authority Leaders and Business Leaders. In CLG (ed). London
- DCLG (2011) Unlocking Growth in Cities. In CLG (ed). London
- Dorling, D and Thomas, B (2004) *People and Place 2001: A Census Atlas*. Policy Press
- European Investment Bank (2017) £184 million EIB backing for Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund.
- Fitzgerald, T (2017) Greater Manchester's mayoral candidates row over region's housing masterplan. *Manchester Evening News*. Manchester
- Hall, P (2007) Evolution of Strategic Planning and Regional Development. In Dimitriou, HT and Thompson, R (eds) *Strategic Planning for Regional Development in the UK: A review of principles and practices*. London: Routledge
- Hambleton, R (2015) Power, place and the New Civic Leadership. *Local Economy* 30: 167-172
- Harvie, C (1991) English Regionalism: The Dog that Never Barked. In Crick, B (ed) *National Identities: The Constitution of the United Kingdom*. Oxford: Blackwell
- HM Government (2017) Building our Industrial Strategy. In Government, H (ed). London
- HMG (1983) Streamlining the Cities. In HMG (ed). London
- Hunt, T (2005) *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* London: Phoenix
- Jones, A (2017) Did the Government set out a place-based industrial strategy? : Centre for Cities
- Jones, KE, Lord, A and Shields, R (eds.) (2015) *City-Regions in Prospect? Exploring the Meeting Points Between Place and Practice*, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press
- Mance, H and Bounds, A (2016) Theresa May shifts focus from 'Northern Powerhouse'. *Financial Times*.
- Massey, D (1989) Regional Planning 1909-1939: the experimental era. In Garside, PL and Hebbert, M (eds) *British Regionalism 1900-2000*. Mansell,: London
- McCann, P (2016) *The UK Regional-National Economic Problem*. London: Routledge
- Nurse, A (2012) Delivering Effective Local Public Services: The Case of Local Area Agreements. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press
- Nurse, A (2015a) Bridging the Gap? The role of regional governance in delivering effective public services Evidence from England. *Planning Practice & Research* 30: 69-82
- Nurse, A (2015b) Creating the north from the sum of its parts? Research questions to assess the Northern Powerhouse. *Local Economy* 30
- Nurse, A (2017) City Centre Regeneration to Drive Economic Competitiveness? The Case Study of Liverpool One. *LHI Journal of Land, Housing and Urban Affairs* Forthcoming
- Osborne, G (2014) Chancellor of the Exchequer on what we can do to make the cities of the north a powerhouse for our economy again. [Speech].
- Parkinson, M, Hutchins, M, Simmie, J, Clark, G and Verdonk, H (2004) *Competitive European Cities: Where do the Core Cities Stand?* London: ODPM
- Peck, J and Tickell, A (2002) Neoliberalizing space. *Antipode* 34: 380-404
- Pugalis, L (2011) Look before you LEP. *Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal* 5: 7-22
- Pugh, M (2014) Centralism versus localism? Democracy versus efficiency? The perennial challenges of Scottish local government organisation. *History and Policy*
- Rae, A (2013) English urban policy and the return to the city: A decade of growth, 2001–2011. *Cities* 32: 94-101
- Rallings, C and Thrasher, M (2016) *Local and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections May 2016*. Plymouth: Elections Centre Plymouth University,
- Roberts, P, Thomas, K and Williams, G (1999) *Metropolitan Planning in Great Britain – A comparative study*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Rogers, R (1999) *Toward an Urban Renaissance*. London

- Sandford, M (2015) *Directly Elected Mayors*. London: House of Commons Library
- Shaw, K and Robinson, F (2007) 'The End of the Beginning'? Taking Forward Local Democratic Renewal in the Post-Referendum North East. *Local Economy* 22: 243-260
- Shaw, K, Robinson, F and Blackie, J (2014) Borderlands: Rescaling economic development in Northern England in the context of greater Scottish autonomy. *Local Economy* 29: 412-428
- Taylor, N (1998) *Urban Planning Theory Since 1945*. London: Sage
- Tewdwr-Jones, M and Allmendinger, P (2007) Regional institutions, governance and the planning system. In Dimitriou, HT and Thompson, R (eds) *Strategic Planning for Regional Development in the UK: A review of principles and practices*. London: Routledge
- Tewdwr-Jones, M and McNeil, D (2000) The politics of city-region planning and governance: reconciling the national, regional and urban in the competing voices of institutional restructuring. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 7: 119-134
- Wilks-Heeg, S and Clayton, S (2006) *WHOSE TOWN IS IT ANYWAY? THE STATE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN TWO NORTHERN TOWNS*. York: Joseph Roundtree Charitable Trust

**Map 1 – The Sub-regions of the Northern Powerhouse**



**Source:** Alexander Nurse with “Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census: Digitised Boundary Data (England and Wales) [computer file]. UK Data Service Census Support. Downloaded from:

<https://borders.ukdataservice.ac.uk/>”